

EVERYDAY STRATEGIES: Autism and the Things it Teaches™

by Sabra Townsend

**Ideas and strategies that may help you
make it thru the day...**

**Presented at
6th Annual Autism Conference
LaSalle University
Philadelphia, PA**

Friday, May 4, 2012

What was once strange is now familiar, what was familiar sometimes seems strange...

WELCOME! Besides a healthy dose of faith in whomever you place your belief and a whacky sense of humor for the challenges you may face, I believe that having a few practical tips will help us all make it through the day. I have gathered a few suggestions here. I am not the author or originator of these tips. This list includes ideas and suggestions that have been used by me and many other families that I have talked with or had the pleasure of ‘meeting’ on the internet. I have included a few links and sources in *italics* next to the topic. This is not, in any way, meant to be a complete list nor is it an endorsement of any of the sites or products. I listed them only so that you might have an idea of where to start on a particular issue.

I am not a: doctor, nurse, psychologist, occupational therapist, teacher, social worker or hairdresser. I am the mother of a fourteen year old boy on the autism spectrum, who has exhibited, at some point in his life, most of the challenges that you may be dealing with.

Please remember, a diagnosis doesn't change your child, it explains your child. And sometimes, it doesn't even do that. If you think a suggestion listed here might work for you and your family, great! If not, pass them on to someone else. If you choose to use these tips and suggestions, please do so with care and common sense. I am not responsible for your results, good or bad. If you find a tip useful, please let me know. If you have a suggestion to add, or a concern to share, tell me that also. I'll add it in for the next list. Thank you to each and every one of you who have shared tips and suggestions. Enjoy!

Peace, Sabra sabra.townsend@gmail.com

TAKING CARE OF YOU

First and foremost, you must make time to take care of yourself. You are worth it. I know that this isn't always easy, but it is important. See your dentist, OB/GYN, therapist, chiropractor, ophthalmologist, etc. Schedule your annual appointments in your birthday month. When you finish your hair appointment (even if you do your own hair), put the next one in your calendar. Oh yeah, keep a calendar. Other than the medical/personal stuff, here are a few suggestions:

Make quiet time for yourself. Wake up a little earlier. Take some time before you go to sleep. Lock yourself in the bathroom if you have to. Meditate. Pray. Stretch. Do whatever it takes to relax and reflect on the good things that you experience during a day, even if it's only five minutes. Put a symbol on the door, or wear a favorite scarf or hat. Use the symbol or your scarf/hat to teach your family that this is your quiet time.

TIPS: Take a pretty walk to work...Listen to your favorite song...Light a fragrant candle... Dance... Crochet...Read a good book...Write poetry or keep a journal...Exercise...Buy yourself a bouquet of flowers... Have a ‘girls night out’... Drink a cup of tea from your favorite mug or teacup... Get a manicure and a pedicure... Watch a goofy movie... Wear a new hairstyle ...Take a ‘one-night hotel’ vacation... Sort photographs... plant a garden or window box... Schedule a full body massage

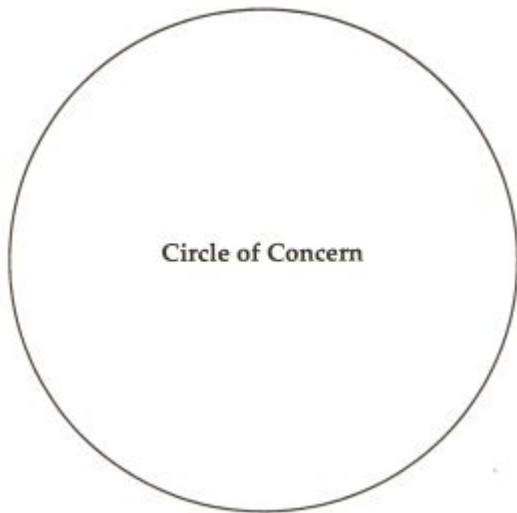
The whole point here is just to do something that you enjoy. Find an activity that you like to do, an activity that is relaxing and enjoyable. Find the time, take the time, to take care of you.

Keep (or develop) a sense of humor. There have been studies indicating that laughter helps us to relax and live a less stressful life. Sometime it helps to just laugh at some of the things that happen in our lives.

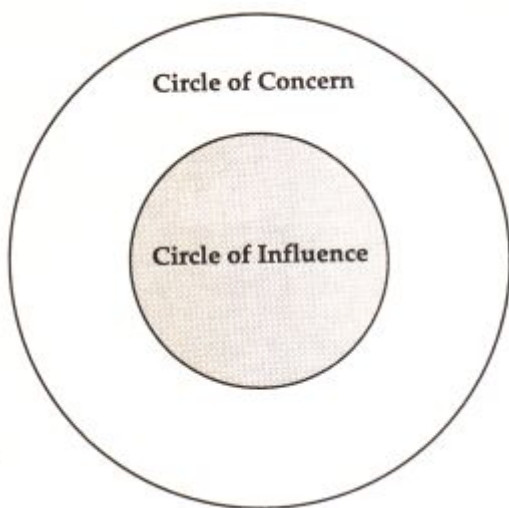
TAKING CARE OF YOU, cont'd

Stress Release Exercise

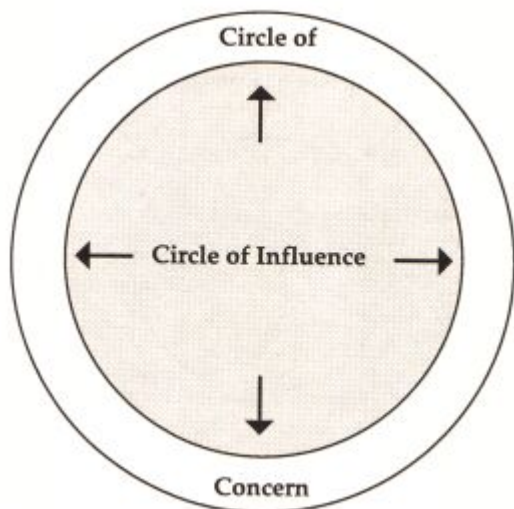
Think about things that worry or bother you. What can you do about them? Example: Your mom will not watch your son because your son has a disability. But she watches cousins, nieces, strangers. You cannot change the way your mom is, but can stop stressing and getting upset with her about this. This concern goes here. **If you can't change the issue, put it in the 'Circle of Concern.'**



Now, think about things you can change. Where can you take action or change the way you look at or interact with these things. e.g., You can barter with other mothers and friends to stay with your son. You make a new friend and visit a new neighborhood. Put this issue here, right in the middle! **If you can do something about the issue, it goes in your "Circle of Influence."** e.g., If someone always calls you with negativity, you can change this by not answering the phone (caller ID is wonderful!) or by telling them that you need to focus on something positive right now.



Focus on what you can do, what is helpful for you. Be a part of the solution in helping yourself. Think of ways to be more proactive. Think of things you can change in a positive, easy way. Your 'Circle of Influence' will get bigger and your 'Circle of Concern' will shrink.



The point is, once you see what the concerns are, you will now have a simple tool to process what you can change and what you can't, you can then decide how to focus on what you can influence and what you can do.

TANTRUMS

Remember, **SAFETY ALWAYS COMES FIRST.** Do what you have to do in the moment to keep you and your child safe. Smaller, confined spaces are usually better. Open spaces may allow for elopement. Quiet voices are usually better. Shouting may increase or elongate the tantrum. When you have time to breathe, you might consider some of the following suggestions:

During a tantrum, your world may get very small. Stay close. Keep yourself and your child from harm. If you have to and she is small enough, hug her tight and keep your head up. There are different opinions on “stopping” tantrums. My experience has been, with safety in mind, to ‘let them play out.’ Keep the child away from windows, drapes, dishes, etc. (anything that is sharp, hot or projectile).

After a tantrum, you can assess the damage. If your child is verbally responsive, when things have calmed down, you might ask “What happened?” Listen carefully to his response. A child can say a whole lot with one or two words. **Using your judgment, have the child help to clean up.**

Break down tantrums into smaller parts. In a quiet moment, think back to the last few tantrums. Can you sense when a tantrum is about to happen? Do you know what the “triggers” might be? What brings them on? Maybe there is something you can change, maybe there isn’t. But there might be something easy you can do to avoid a total meltdown. **Examples:** Save a few extra snacks so there will be some when she asks for more. Stop playing ten minutes before you normally do. “Okay, you have ten minutes, then we have to stop _____. 5 min, etc. Use a **Time Timer**.

<http://www.timetimer.com/>

What to say to people. Remember, you don’t have to say anything. Most times, people just look and mumble something under their breath. If for some reason, they feel compelled to approach you or your child, here are some suggestions: ‘I’m his mother/father, if you want to help, please _____(put your polite suggestion here).’ ‘My son has autism, he’s having a tantrum. I know what I’m doing.’

LAW ENFORCEMENT /FIRST RESPONDERS

Consider introducing yourself and your child to your local law enforcement / first responders while things are calm and stable. This doesn’t mean that something will happen, but if it does, this may be helpful.

If law enforcement or first responders are involved, breathe, talk as calmly and as clearly as you can. You may choose to tell the officer that the child/young adult is mentally retarded. If the officer is not familiar with autism, he or she may be familiar with MR.

The Premise Alert System program to assist individuals with special needs and First Responders in Pennsylvania by Susan F. Rzucidlo <http://www.papremisealert.com/>

Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals -- Recognizing and Reducing Risk Situations for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders by Dennis Debbaudt

<http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book.php?isbn=1-85302-980-7>

DARTING/RUNNING AWAY (also called ELOPEMENT)

Keep your child close to you. Two seconds is too long. If your child is “Houdini” you may have to keep your track shoes on and hold hands at all times. Tell everyone else to “hold their hand.” ‘Let’ them hold your hand and seriously consider some kind of harness. Of course, as they get older, holding hands and the harness become less and less effective.

Introducing yourself and your child to your neighbors. Get to know them and your neighborhood.

Harnesses The Harness sits on the upper torso between the underarm and the waist.. This is recommended by pediatricians because it is one of the strongest places on a toddler's body. It is not as safe when a harness is placed at the waist on a young child. When children are older and extremely steady on their feet you can use a harness or belt at the waist.



Toddler Harness



Toddler Harness



Easy Install Door Alarms



TIPS: Door / window alarms...ID in tattoo format...GPS child locators...ID on shoes & wrists.

Tommi Guard - <http://www.tommiguard.com/>

Autism Society of America -- Safe and Sound Campaign

<http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/how-we-can-help/safe-and-sound/>

Breaking Autism's Barriers: A Father's Story by Bill Davis

http://www.autismtoday.com/experts/experts_bio.asp?exp_id=58&name=Bill%20Davis

My Precious Kid - Child Safety Products <http://www.mypreciouskid.com/child-autism-safety.html>

SELF-INJURIOUS BEHAVIORS

REMEMBER SAFETY FIRST. Talk with your pediatrician immediately. While self-harm is not usually suicidal behavior, it should still be taken seriously. **As with other kinds of addictive behaviors, you cannot simply tell someone to stop and expect her or him to comply.** A professional therapist is usually needed to assist in overcoming self-injurious behavior.

HelpGuide.Org -- Self Injury http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm

IN THE HOUSE

The age and stage of your child makes a difference in what you can and cannot do on a daily basis. Some tips may be better suited for younger ones, other tips may be more appropriate for children of school age or older. Find ways for your child to help you get the job done. Think of “teachable moments.”

Work smarter, not harder. TIPS: Prepare meals on the weekend and freeze them... Prepare your clothes for the week... Go grocery shopping on line and have it delivered... Write a note to yourself telling you all the great stuff you do, then take the time to read it when you feel overwhelmed. Choose an easy hair style, or schedule your hair appts 2 – 3 at a time (and keep them...) Put your favorite music on your ipod or treat yourself to an ipod / mp3 player... Using secure sites, pay your bills on line... Do laundry at night, toss in dryer and go to bed (also saves on electricity...) Prepare snacks in ziplock bags or purchase individual snack bags (you might have to hide them...) Keep washed, fresh fruit (for you and the kids)... If possible, teach your child to help you. This may take longer at first, but it will help you when they (and you) are older.

KITCHEN

TIPS: SAFETY FIRST Cook on the back burners... Keep a bin of ‘kid stuff in the kitchen... Make a cabinet into a toy box... Keep hand sanitizing gel all over the house (though don’t use it if your kids lick their hands...) Keep a fire extinguisher handy

If possible, have your child help in the kitchen. Go for easy stuff with quick results. Kraft "EASYMAC" is actually easy and it doesn't taste too bad either... Slice and bake cookies are cool to watch "melt"... Jello teaches patience ... Let them measure... Tell you how much time is left on the timer... **Microwaves** do have child locks. With your supervision (later, by themselves) let him push the microwave buttons... **“Wipe-able” placemats** makes clean up a breeze. (Dollar stores)

If you have a dishwasher, use it. Teach kids to cook on the open dishwasher door. They can pour, mix, spill, etc., at their own height and without worrying about spills. You can basically just shut and wash it with the dishes that way. Fun for them and no stress for you.

Use the stove/oven timer to set a time to end an activity. I have used my digital alarm clock and the alarm on my cell phone. This works for in and out of the house. Watch TV for 15 minutes, then 4Bs (**B**rush (and floss) teeth, take **B**ath, read **B**ook, go to **B**ed)

Adaptive equipment I found dollar store bowls that have a "lip" on them. Makes it much easier to eat cereal, pasta, or whatever happens to be for dinner. Fat handled spoons, forks, etc.

Portion control The small packs of sugar (salt, pepper, ketchup, etc) for portion control. These are available to purchase in bulk at most grocery stores. Also, BJ's, Sams, Costco, etc.

BATHROOM / GROOMING

TIPS: Bathtime/shower Consider wearing your bathing suit. If he doesn't take the bath, see if you can figure out a way to take it! Wall toys, letters, numbers. **Soap** Johnson's Buddies Easy-grip sudzing bar, comes in an orange box in the "baby" aisle... Bubble baths seem to work well... Also, in a pinch, most liquid hand soaps make great bubbles. I refill the hand pump container.

Toileting Try to catch them doing the right thing. Use a timer if you have to. Elastic waist bands are so much easier for the child to work with. No fancy belts, snaps, buttons. Create a social story with pictures for using the bathroom. The pictures may need to include your child, and have graphic pictures of what the toilet and toilet paper looks like before and right after urinating or defecating. ...

Flushable wipes A lot of the no-name brands are starting to make flushable wipes. Sometimes a bit easier than regular toilet paper. (Maybe a bit more expensive, but worth it...) Be sure to check your plumbing to make sure it can handle the flushables.

Nail Care I have clipped them when he is asleep. Also, clipped them after bathtime, the nails are softer and don't make the 'click' sound. Clipped them before a favorite activity.

Dental Care *NUK brush massager* has a flexible, nubby texture that offers sensory input for the child's mouth. The nubby surface can hold tastes of liquid, purees or crumbs while it is used with supervision as a "spoon" for initial feedings. Try an electric toothbrush, *Benefit 3-in-1 toothbrush*, individual flossers (bright colors) with ACT rinse, use a washcloth, *OraJel fluoride free toothpaste*, *Radius toothbrush*

Haircare / Haircuts Sensory issues abound! For short hair, soft bristle baby brushes may do the trick. For some texture of longer hair, wet combing is much easier. Help them care for their own hair. Work to allow them to choose the style that they like. Haircuts can be tough. I bought electric clippers and I know one style – bald. As he got older, I found a patient, kind young barber who is great.

Shampoo Consider a shampoo hood to allow the hair to be washed without getting water in the child's face. Try a dry shampoo.

Some Beauty Supply or Dollar Stores.



HEALTH AND WELLNESS / MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS / VISITS



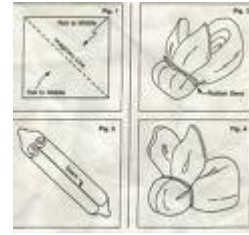
**No Fluoride
Toothpaste**



NUK brush massager



Boo-boo Ice Bunny



Bunny Pattern

TIPS: First Aid *Bactine*, sanitizing gel, *Nexcare spray liquid bandage*, clip the fingernails at night while they sleep, Booboo bunny (ice in terry cloth material), bag of frozen peas or corn. First aid kit on every floor and in cars. **Fire extinguisher in Kitchen, Garage and Cars.**

American Association of Poison Control Centers

<http://aapcc.org/DNN/Resources/FindLocalPoisonCenters/tabid/130/Default.aspx>

Keep Poison Control # on fridge and in cell phone

24-hr toll-free emergency hotline: National: 1-800-222-1222 (Can be used in 50 states and DC)

Same location

Local: 215-386-2100

TIPS: Ask for the first appointment of the day or first back after lunch. Let every one know that you are coming. Bring activities. Fisher Price DVD player (used to be called 'Little Tykes', I'm told they are indestructible) Ask if you can make appt just to see the office without actually having anything done. If closed spaces work well for your child, make arrangements to go right back to the exam room. If open spaces work better, explain that waiting until the last minute to go to the exam room is the best way. **Waiting Room** I carry bubbles, stickers, coloring books, floor activities, fidget toys, gameboy, laptop, charge cord, 3 prong adapter, etc... A **fidget toy** is anything that is cheap, small and quiet, but not small enough to be swallowed. Plan a favorite activity after the visit. Keep your promise about that activity. I have learned to make this a 'non-food' activity.

Dentist Ask the dentist if you can look around the office even though you do not have an appointment. See the chair, sit in the chair. Hear the sounds, experience the bright light in his face.

Wait in the lobby. Request more time. Ensure that the chart says "Autism." Explain to all staff that sensory issues are involved. I always ask "Did you look at his chart?"

Blood Draws If your child needs a blood draw, ask doctor's office for prescription "EMLA" cream to be applied at home before the test. Emla is a topical anesthetic patch that will numb the site where blood needs to be taken. This is not always effective if they wind up using the "other" arm...

Medical Home Ask your doctor if they are a "Medical Home" practice. The idea with Medical Home is that the doctor's office works to connect you with other services that you may need. There may even be a person, a care coordinator, to help your child receive the services that she needs. **Ask your doctor for a medical summary of your child. Keep it updated as changes occur.**

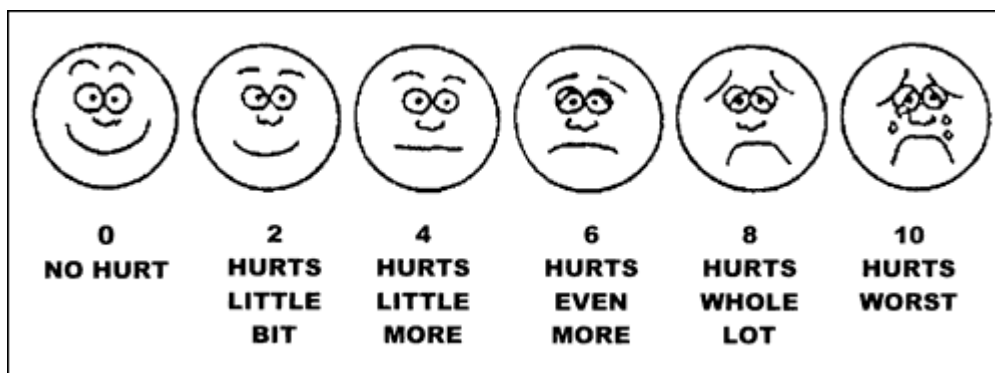
Medical Home in Pennsylvania

<http://www.pamedicalhome.org/>

PAIN MANAGEMENT

Pain Assessment. This can be very difficult in children with autism. Your powers of observation will often be your best indicator. Use the “Pain Faces”

Pediatric Pain Rating Scale (Universal Pain Assessment Tool)



CLOTHING

Texture is very important to a lot of our kids. Favorite items (e.g. hat, hair ornament, fuzzy sweater) of a particular color or texture can be very comforting. Temperature differences may also be an issue, e.g. short sleeves when it's freezing out, winter coat when it's 88F degrees. Have your daughter help to lay out her clothes for school on Sunday afternoon. Have your son choose his weekend wear on Friday when he gets home from school.

TIPS: Clothing *Hanes* and *Fruit of the Loom* make tagless underwear... *Payless* usually has a variety of shoes in the larger kids sizes with velcro, zipper, slip-on, etc. Huge variety online... *Famous Footwear* has a shoe size take home sheet. *Hanes* and others have color-coded, seamless socks. *Target*, *Walmart*, *Family Dollar*, *Children's Place* (lots of stores now) carry tagless brands.

MORNING

Try to keep it simple. This is much easier said than done, but things like: always putting keys in the same place, buying slip-on shoes, putting things you need to take with you by the front door, get up earlier to allow time for your “morning routine.”

Get things done before your child wakes up. Note: I didn't say wake up before your child wakes up. I swear I've showered, made breakfast, and gotten dressed and still been asleep. Some of us still have to dress or assist with dressing our family member. Dress yourself first. (airplane example)

Set out items the night before. Things such as clothes, school bag with homework, signed trip slip, etc. This may help you and your child get going in the morning. Have your child help with these tasks.

Put lights/lamps on timers. I don't worry about turning lights off when I leave the house,. They are timed on at 6am , timed to go off about 15 minutes after I'm gone and come back on before dusk.

AFTERSCHOOL / HOME WORK

Routines seem to work well here. You might allow some downtime, even if you have to schedule it. Your child worked hard all day long (and so have you!) On the other hand, you might have to save the 'downtime' as a reward for getting the homework finished. If possible, use a communication book with your child's school. Have teacher/aide write daily notes. You can also respond with daily notes. This way you both will have a better idea of what kind of day/night your child has experienced.

If you have the space, have an area where you only do homework. If you don't have that kind of space, use a special placement at the dinner table or wear your 'homework hats.' Try lap pads.

TIPS: Homework Golf pencils – the short, eraserless pencils, dollar store slide board for **Handwriting Without Tears** <http://www.hwtears.com/> ...wipe off math boards (*Wal-Mart, Beckers*) ...separate erasers...flash cards (with the answers)....In spring and late summer, when it stays light later, sometimes we do homework outside.

NIGHT TIME /SLEEP

Here is another place where routines may be helpful. We use the **4Bs** -- **B**rush (and floss) teeth, take **B**ath, read **B**ook, go to **B**ed. It doesn't always work, but it helps.

TIPS: Chamomile tea. Try it warm in the winter with a little honey and milk or iced cold in the summer. Chamomile is also thought to be a natural diuretic, so it may work against you if your child wets the bed **Lavender** Night time lotion with lavender (*Target or Johnson's*) ...**Flashlight** A small flashlight may help you check on your child without waking her up.... **Mother's little helpers.** I have had doctors suggest a small dose of *Benadryl*. This is not medical advice, check with your child's doctor... Some kids get overly stimulated on *Benadryl*. **Melatonin** has also been suggested as a helpful supplement. **Family Doctor.Org**
<http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/articles/258.html>

IN GENERAL/AROUND THE HOUSE

TIPS:



Exercise balls



Squishy Seating



Wedge Seating



Toys in Carry Bins

Household Chores Get a large box of Baking Soda and a toothbrush. Let your OCD and perseverative kids help you clean the bathtub tiles. Do the kitchen sink too. It's harmless and can take up some time and help you at same time. (You might want to use red nail polish to mark the toothbrush just for this purpose.)

OUT OF THE HOUSE

DINING OUT

Dine out with your family. If you eat "fast food" go thru the drive thru first, ask for a cup holder for the beverages, have them put all of the condiments, extra napkins, etc. in a bag or on the cupholder. Then come inside to eat. You will have everything all ready at the table.

TIPS: Picture menus. Ask the restaurant if they have a menu with pictures of the food...It may even be printed in various languages or Braille. **Check on line** for menu specials and discounts. **Start with short trips.** Order just an appetizer or go just for dessert. It's only a small cost and if you have to leave, you've at least gotten a little something to eat.... **Choose pleasant, family friendly restaurants.** *Applebees, Friendlys, IHOP.* Local restaurants may also be a good choice. You may be able to develop a good relationship with local businesses so they will get to know you and your child. I know one family that has all of their birthday and holiday parties at a local deli. . **Seating** I have found that a booth, especially a corner booth, works much better than tables and chairs. If you have a friend in a wheelchair, you may find just the opposite. Sometimes, I sit next to my son instead of across from him...

Do leave a tip. It makes for a better experience for you and the next person who has a special need.

SHOPPING

At first, you may find it so much easier to shop when your children are in the care of someone else. If this is what you need to do, by all means, do it. **Shop on line.** Use secure sites with free shipping and liberal return policies. **Swap shop.** Ask a good friend to grocery shop for you and schedule a time to return the favor. **Shop the day after the store gets new stock.** Ask the store manager what day they receive large deliveries. I try to go grocery shopping at less crowded times. I shop in stores that are bigger and have wider aisles.

Ease into 'full blown' grocery shopping with your children. Also, remember that stores are full of teachable moments when your children are with you.

TIPS: Start with short trips to smaller stores, e.g. corner stores, WaWa, 7-11.. **Shopping carts** Push her in the cart until they are too big to fit ... **Small jobs** Keep small jobs in mind, "Push the cart for me" "Pick four pretty Gala apples"... Have her read the grocery list. Send him on short (then longer) errands... "Please get a ½ gallon of Tropicana Orange Juice with no pulp."

Keeping him busy Take a favorite toy along or even a toy that only travels in the car... **Practice waiting.** Label it, say " Hey, we are waiting in line. What can we do while we wait?" Some ideas, count the lights in the ceiling, how many people are in front of you. Talk about the different streets you have traveled, other places you have been and had to wait, other things you have waited for (waited for honey to roll out of the jar, etc.)

Public Opinion Ignore all people who feel the need to stare or make comments. This is about helping your child learn about social interactions and competencies.

TRAVEL

Cars Learn where the **child locks** are in every car your child will be in. Show the driver how to use them when driving, (even if they say they already know). Then, write a letter to automakers urging them to design door locks and child safety locks that automatically disengage upon impact. **Obey all traffic rules.** Your children are watching and learning. **Car Seats** For the younger child, a harness type car seat that closes in the back might be best. You may also consider installing a wider rear view mirror so that you can see more of what is happening in the back seat.

Keeping Kids Safe During Crashes <http://stokes.chop.edu/programs/carseat/>

Public Transportation Ride the bus, even if it only for one or two stops. Same with the subway, regional trains and EL. Go to the train station, but don't get on the train. Just watch them pass by.

Trip Planning Describe where you are going and the plan for the trip. "First we are going to CVS, then we will stop at the POST OFFICE and finally we will go back home." Try to keep that order. When plans change, e.g. traffic or construction, It may help to 'warn' of up-coming changes. "We have to go a different way today. The road is we usually take is closed."

Handicapped Parking Investigate your local regulations on "handicapped" stickers/hang tags for your car. If you feel as though you qualify, do not hesitate to apply.

School Bus Harness style seat belts, bus aides, special seating can be requested in the IEP under transportation as a related service to the educational needs of the child.

COMMUNICATIONS

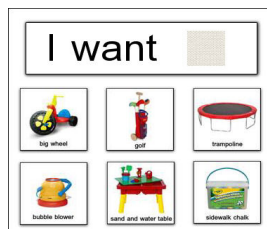
All behavior is communication. Crying, screaming, kicking, spitting, etc. is communication of some kind. Try your best to have patience and don't take it personally. Listen. Sign Language may help and does not delay vocalization and speech.

Hanen: More than Words <http://www.hanen.org>

Alternative Augmentative Communication for Children with Autism: PECS and Sign
http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.kobza/sign_language

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) can be used in many different situations.
<http://www.pecs.com/> PECS is a system of communication that can be used in many situations.

PECS works well for some children. Some children outgrow them. PECS books of signs. Make an extra copy for different situations, e.g. the school bus. If there is an aide on the bus, get his/her name, and ask they they be trained in PECS.



Different examples of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)